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STRENGTHENING INTERNATIONAL STATISTICAL COOPERATION

Coordination of statistical data collection from countries

Report of the Secretary-General

SUMMARY

Section I of the present report summarizes the major changes that have occurred in international statistical data-collection activities during the past two years (paras. 5-7). Section II gives a description of further developments since the preparation of the 1993 inventory of data collection (paras. 8-14). Section III contains proposals for improved coordination of data collection from countries (paras. 15-17). Points for discussion are included in section IV (para. 18).

* E/CN.3/1994/1.

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INTRODUCTION

1. At its twenty-seventh session, in February 1993, the Statistical Commission requested the Statistical Division of the United Nations Secretariat (UNSTAT) and the international organizations to place more emphasis on coordination matters, including statistical data-collection activities. 1/ To support the coordination process, the Commission had specified a number of instruments and tools to be developed and/or improved, one of which was the inventory of statistical data-collection activities (E/CN.3/AC.1/1993/R.6 and Add.1).

2. The Statistical Commission's Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Coordination, at its sixteenth session, in 1993, and the Subcommittee on Statistical Activities of the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) at its twenty-seventh session, in 1993, endorsed the work on the inventory, which was designed to identify duplication and overlap in requests by international and regional organizations for data from countries, and to assist national statistical offices and other national statistical agencies in obtaining an overview of the nature and timing of statistical reports expected by international and regional organizations. See the note by the Secretary-General transmitting the report of the ACC Subcommittee on Statistical Activities on its twenty-seventh session (E/CN.3/1994/4). The international organizations were requested to make improvements in the 1993 version of the inventory taking into account comments and recommendations expressed by the participants of the above-mentioned international meetings.

3. The 1993 version of the inventory consists of seven parts and three annexes. The inventory contains a description of data-collection activities including changes in activities over the preceding two years as well as information on data collection through machine-readable products and by computer. Interchange of data is also discussed. Annex I contains a description of statistical data-collection activities, information on addressees and publications in which statistical series appear, and annex II describes statistics collection via questionnaires and magnetic tapes: deadlines for return and month of dispatch. Annex III contains the Administrative Committee on Coordination Programme Classification for Statistical Activities. The inventory had been prepared by UNSTAT on a biennial basis for many years. Listing in annex I is arranged by organization.

4. An innovation introduced into the 1993 version of the inventory was the structuring of annex I along the lines of subject-matter rather than by organization, to facilitate its use as a coordination tool, as has been requested by the Statistical Commission at its twenty-seventh session. The classification of data-collection activities used the ACC Programme Classification for Statistical Activities.

I. DEVELOPMENTS IN DATA-COLLECTION ACTIVITIES OVER THE PAST TWO YEARS

5. Since the previous, 1991 version of the inventory (E/CN.3/AC.1/1991/R.7), a total of 13 data-collection activities have been discontinued: 1 within the Statistical Division of the United Nations Secretariat (UNSTAT); 4 within the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE); 1 within the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO); 2 within the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO); 3 within the Statistical Office of the European Communities (EUROSTAT); and 2 within the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). A total of 25 data-collection activities have been merged into 6: ECE merged 21 questionnaires into 4 and OECD merged 4 questionnaires into 2. A total of 27 requests have been introduced: 9 in ECE; 1 in the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP); 1 in the International Labour Organization (ILO); 1 in FAO; 1 in the World Health Organization (WHO); 2 in the International Telecommunication Union (ITU); 11 in EUROSTAT; and 1 in OECD.

6. Other adjustments included the following: ECE split one questionnaire into two (ECE-6 and ECE-17), introduced new additions to two existing questionnaires and replaced one questionnaire with another; and FAO replaced one questionnaire by another reducing the periodicity of the request for production data from countries.

7. Also apparent from the 1993 version of the inventory are (a) significant exchanges of completed questionnaires and joint questionnaires among the organizations; (b) additional interchange of data on a regular basis by other means such as magnetic tape, diskette, on-line access to databases, publications and advance copies of manuscript tables; (c) additional proposals for sharing data and reducing reporting burdens; (d) use of tailored questionnaires in some areas to reduce reporting burdens; and (e) increasing use of electronic means for transmitting data from countries to organizations, which can also reduce reporting burdens in some cases and simplify and promote further data exchange among the international organizations.

II. FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS SINCE THE PREPARATION OF THE 1993 INVENTORY OF DATA COLLECTION

8. The subject of coordination of data-collection activities was a topic of concern at various global and regional statistical meetings (see para. 2 above) including the Conference of European Statisticians. 2/ It was noted that despite the improved cooperation among the international organizations, the coordination in the area of statistical data collection could be improved and that the response burden for small statistical offices was unnecessarily heavy. Similar concerns were expressed at the Directors-General of National Statistical Institutes (DGINS) meeting organized by EUROSTAT and held in Dublin in May 1993. Several of the six inter-agency subject-specific task forces established by the Statistical Commission are also addressing ways of reducing the reporting burden on countries.

9. In compiling the inventory for 1993, some indications were obtained of the plans of the international organizations regarding data-collection activities for the immediate future.

10. UNSTAT is planning to substantially revise the Monthly Bulletin of Statistics questionnaire in 1994, based on the results of the expert group meeting held in February 1993 to review the Bulletin and the Statistical Yearbook and on further consultations with agencies. However, the general size and periodicity of the Bulletin questionnaire are expected to stay the same. High priority will be given in the period 1994-1995 to developing methods for circulating that questionnaire, compiling the data from countries and disseminating the results using electronic technologies such as electronic mail (email), the File Transmission Protocol (FTP) and the Rules for Electronic Data Interchange for Administration, Commerce and Transport (EDIFACT). In connection with the planned completion for electronic publication in 1993 of the Statistical Division's Core Statistical Time-Series and Inventory of Computerized Statistical Database (CoreStat) of principal economic and social time-series of countries, a special effort was to be made to compile available series for the transition countries, for which little data were currently available from the international questionnaire.

11. As countries start to implement a revised System of National Accounts (SNA), a revised questionnaire will be needed to collect data on the basis of such revision. Members of the Intersecretariat Working Group on National Accounts (ISWGNA) are collaborating to ensure that a single coordinated questionnaire on national accounts will be sent to each country - such a questionnaire as can meet the different data needs of all ISWGNA members and other users. Specifically OECD and EUROSTAT will propose a questionnaire that is suitable for the member countries of OECD and the European Economic Association (EEA), and that is consistent with the 1993 SNA and the revised European System of Integrated Economic Accounts (ESA) and compatible with a questionnaire to be used by UNSTAT for other countries.

12. It was planned that beginning in 1994, responsibility for the United Nations General Industrial Statistics questionnaire and Supplementary General Industrial Statistics Questionnaire would move from the Statistical Division of the United Nations Secretariat to the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO).

13. Also commencing in 1994, in May of each year a request will be sent to all countries (that may not have done so already) asking them to transmit their detailed trade statistics (commodity by partner) for the preceding calendar year on magnetic tape, on diskette or in publication form. There will be a follow-up request in June of each year. Proposals were being developed by UNSTAT and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for implementation in 1994, whereby UNSTAT would use aggregate import and export values and index numbers collected by IMF for most countries and cease collecting these series independently. Technical studies are being carried out by the Statistical Division, OECD and EUROSTAT to try to streamline the collection of detailed trade statistics (commodity by partner), from member States for inclusion in those organizations' databases.

14. IMF is expanding the coverage of statistics in its areas of responsibility to include more countries, with the ultimate goal of covering all member countries in IMF statistical publications. Furthermore, IMF is encouraging various countries to enhance the comprehensiveness and quality of data submitted.

III. PROPOSALS FOR IMPROVED COORDINATION OF STATISTICAL DATA COLLECTION FROM COUNTRIES

15. At its twenty-seventh session, the ACC Subcommittee on Statistical Activities suggested a number of ways to further improve the present inventory in order to expand awareness of the inventory at the national level and of its use at both the international and national levels (E/CN.3/1994/4, para. 15). Suggestions included the development of country-region-specific lists of data-collection activities; the assignment of a unique identification number to each questionnaire; the specific identification of the government department or agency to which each data inquiry was sent; and the specification of the mode of each collection activity, namely questionnaire, magnetic tape or diskette, or direct access to national database. The full list of proposed suggestions may be found in the note by the Secretary-General transmitting the report of the ACC Subcommittee on Statistical Activities on its twenty-seventh session (E/CN.3/1994/4). Some of these proposals can be implemented relatively easily, while others are either more costly or more complex. The various suggestions and options are now being reviewed and will be considered by the Subcommittee at its next session. It was also agreed by the Subcommittee that the inventory, among other tools and reporting mechanisms, should be identified as a product of the Subcommittee on Statistical Activities (E/CN.3/1994/4, para. 31).

16. As requested by the Subcommittee and in line with past practice, the inventory was sent to all national statistical offices for their comments on its usefulness, and to enable them to identify any apparent duplication in requests received from international organizations and indicate the specific uses that they might make of it (E/CN.3/1994/4, para. 32). To date, UNSTAT has received replies from 13 national statistical offices. The responses all stressed the usefulness of the inventory as a tool for identifying duplication and overlap in data requests and for assisting national statistical offices in obtaining an overview of the nature and timing of statistical requests from international organizations. Some countries also indicated that the inventory should encourage further steps towards joint collection of data by international organizations.

17. Additionally, the six sectoral inter-agency task forces established by the Working Group were also requested by the Working Group to improve coordination of data collection from countries. The task forces could be requested to obtain copies of each of the questionnaires listed for their areas of concern and review them for duplication. If duplication was apparent, consultations could be held by the involved organizations with the objective of removing the duplication and, if possible, sharing the data collected by a given organization. If successful for these trial areas, the approach could be adopted methodically for all the subject areas in the classification.

IV. POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

18. The Commission may wish to:

(a) Consider that further action, if any, should be taken in relation to coordination of statistical data collection and the exchange of data among the international organizations;

(b) Suggest other ways by which the organization and content of the inventory can be further improved;

(c) Suggest, bearing in mind the ongoing work of the task forces, additional avenues for improving the coordination activities and making countries more aware of existing coordination activities.

Notes

1/ Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1993, Supplement No. 6 (E/1993/26), paras. 5-49.

2/ See document CES/CRP.92/Add.13, para. 6.